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[Monograph]

Published version (with publisher's formatting)

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OCCASIONAL PAPER 9 - Early Years Training and Qualifications in England: Issues for policy and practice

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Introduction

"It's like there are millions of different options, pathways and statuses; like how do you decide which one to do? Only to find in a year's time they have changed it all again. I know there are some teachers in the nursery but they couldn't get into a school with their qualification. It's just a huge mess!"

The Nutbrown Review (2012) sought to address disparities and weaknesses with the Early Years training and qualification framework in England, including the divisive effects of EYPS. Although many of the recommendations in the review were rejected or only partially implemented, a notable exception was the introduction of two new qualifications: Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) and the Early Years Educator (EYE). However, it quickly became apparent that EYTS was denied qualified teacher status (QTS) and all the associated benefits, including support during a newly qualified teacher (NQT) year and national pay scales. This research commissioned by TACTYC was undertaken at a time when EYTs are subjected to the same expectations and demands on teacher training programmes as those in the maintained school sector but enjoy fewer benefits (see full report for more details: www.tactyc.org.uk/research).

Early Years Educator (EYE) was introduced in 2014, for practitioners seeking a Level 3 national vocational qualification. Like EYTS, the EYE qualification has been the subject of much controversy and frustration across the sector, because it has required applicants to hold GCSE English and Maths at grade A-C. This has been a deterrent for many applicants, and presents recruitment challenges to training providers and employers.

The impact, experiences and associated issues with the introduction of these two new qualifications: EYTS and EYE provided the central focus of the study that informed this paper. The study sought to locate the issues surrounding the introduction of these new qualifications within broader debates about training and qualifications in ECEC; debates shaped by policy imperatives to 'raise quality', ensure 'school readiness' (see McDowall Clark, 2016) and measure the effectiveness of the workforce based upon child outcomes. Attention was also given to the investments made in pursuing early years qualifications and the ultimate exchange value they represent within the labour market.

Aims and Scope

This study was commissioned in a quest to map the main issues with which the sector is currently grappling in relation to the current training and qualifications context through a

review of policies since 1997 and by presenting the debates generated in research literature and through media representations. By gathering empirical data the study aimed to identify the impact, experiences and associated issues with the newly introduced qualification pathways: Early Years Teacher and Early Years Educator.

Methodology

The aims and questions outlined were addressed through a small-scale, mixed methods scoping study that captured breadth (in terms of the literature and policy reviewed, range of participants included, and geographical coverage) as well as depth (detailed accounts about the experiences of delivering, receiving and enacting the training and qualifications under investigation). The range of methods included a literature review, collation and analysis of on-line marketing materials for EYTS, EYITT and EYE courses, an on-line survey of training providers, telephone interviews with four stakeholders, three case studies and a one-day focused seminar.

Summary of findings

Entry requirements for the new qualifications are contributing to a crisis

Although now dropped, the previous requirement for all members of the workforce to hold GCSEs at grades A-C has resulted in a 'crisis' in ECEC in terms of recruiting new members, retaining experienced practitioners, and supporting career progression. Despite the policy-drive to raise qualifications, levels within the early years workforce are dropping. Most notable is the drop in numbers of Level 3 qualified staff from 83% to 75% since 2015 (NDNA, 2016a). Overall staff turnover is higher than in previous years, at 19 per cent with turnover at Level 3 being 21%, reportedly due to low wages and lack of progression, i.e. it has not been possible to progress from Levels 1 and 2 if the A-C GCSE requirements are not met. NDNA (2016) also found that employers have reduced staff training budgets as a result of the heavy financial burdens stemming from using agency staff to cover vacancies, keeping pace with the National Living Wage and pension auto-enrolment costs.

This research supported these trends. For example, the A-C grade GCSE entry point for EYE Apprenticeships has negatively impacted upon recruitment and retention of staff. London Early Years Foundation reported an 80% drop in recruitment and a 96% drop in EYE Apprenticeships directly attributable to the requirement for applicants to hold GCSE Maths and English grades A-C upon application. The expansion and affordability agendas pursued by government (i.e. the demand for more childcare and the higher entry qualifications) are

incommensurate and directly contributing to the 'crisis' in childcare identified by the PLA (2016).

These requirements have also had a negative impact upon the recruitment to EYITT and EYTS university programmes. Scott (2016) warned university courses offering training for EYTS are facing closure due to low numbers and this was supported by accounts from training providers surveyed in this study.

Policy-driven demands to 'upskill' and 'raise quality' have witnessed the introduction of these new qualifications but with insufficient clarity and detailed information about their content and value. The government agenda to raise 'quality' through increased levels of qualification has a direct bearing upon the emphasis that is placed on certain qualifications and training over others (i.e. those that are charged with promoting technical competence and delivery of prescribed outcomes above developing criticality and reflexivity).

But as Chalke (2013: 219) asserts:

While it is vital we have early years specialist teachers, that is only half the battle for changing the professional identity and consequently the conditions of all those working with young children ... it is important to seek to capture and promote aspects of a ground-up professionalism such as: the pedagogical approach that allows recognition of work with the child, as well as with their parent and carers; the recognition of the mindful requirements of an ethic of care; and the importance of reflexivity for professional practice.

Curriculum content of training and qualifications

"I've brought stuff back from uni and I've suggested to my room that we try different things out to see if it actually works and it does. So there is that opportunity. You gain the knowledge of how children learn and then you can apply it. Actually, it's not routine, it's the child actively learning, it's the environment, so we can deliberate on that and reflect on why things are happening and how to make them happen differently."

Research participants, like this deputy manager, reflected upon the content of training and qualifications. At Level 3, the NNEB Diploma in Childcare was looked back upon as representing a 'gold standard' because it focused on birth-to-seven, offered a thorough grounding in theories of child development, provided evidence of rigorous teaching and assessment, and offered trainees diverse experiences of early years contexts (through several lengthy placements). The in-depth observational child studies undertaken as part of the NNEB were held in high regard. The newly introduced EYE, which has been broadly modelled on the NNEB Diploma, was, therefore, considered (by employers, training providers and trainees) to provide appropriate course content, a flexible mode of delivery, and appropriate support from assessors, mentors and managers and peers.

At Level 6, the programmes held in highest regard were those that were regarded as 'rigorous' and that enabled students to directly connect theory to practice and to develop deeper pedagogical knowledge that was specific to the early years

(birth-to-five). Attaining a specialist ECEC degree instilled a greater sense of professional confidence and the capacity for deeper reflection on all aspects of working in ECEC. Training providers surveyed reported feeling concerned that there was less emphasis on play, children's rights and leadership on the EYITT pathway.

Combining work with the pursuit of a Level 6 qualification was reported as a challenge and, therefore, the geographical proximity of training providers is a significant factor to determine choice. A bigger factor to determine choice of Level 6 pathway though is QTS; there were examples of participants rejecting EYITT and EYTS in favour of PGCE. Although opting for a PGCE ensures greater currency and transferability of the qualification, it lacks early years specialism and results in a need to 'top-up'. This says much about the career aspirations and exchange value placed on these different qualifications in relation to work with young children as well as how policymakers and providers differentially value different early years roles. EYPS came under most criticism for its preoccupation to 'tick-box' technical competence, as one respondent stressed: *'I've not even mentioned that because it was insignificant ... just tick boxing about what I already do; it had little impact on my practice and way of thinking'*.

In this research, participants made constant reference to a crisis in childcare, downward spirals, uneven playing fields and moving goal posts: the participants felt strongly that there must be decisive action by government to revoke many of the ill-conceived demands being made of the sector. Whilst generating evidence to support this bleak picture, this research was also concerned to identify ways in which the sector might move forward. Whilst much of this report is devoted to accounts of creative and effective ways to ensure quality of early years provision through the development of staff, the broader issues remain. Training can be taken 'in-house' and, as the case studies in this research have demonstrated effectively, 'upskill' the workforce and develop deep critical thinking, which is made easier through economies of scale or localised commitments on the part of single-settings to make costly investments in staff development. Attention must be paid to the entire workforce and collectively, as a sector, there must be recognition that the current 'uneven playing field' with its 'constantly shifting goal posts' is a matter of grave social injustice.

An integral part of the study offered an invitation to researchers and participants to grapple with the image of the child, image of the setting and image of the worker. Taking time to do this generated lively debate, consensus and hope. Working to reconceptualise entrenched ideas about quality, the workforce and imposition of policy (as fixed and problematic) generates possibilities to think more expansively about what might be possible. Crucially the one-day event underlined the urgent need to shift understandings and public perceptions of the sector. Working with young children is the most important, worthwhile and valuable occupation: yet it is routinely and persistently denigrated. As a sector, at all levels, there is an urgent need collectively to resist further damaging policy

reform and instead recognise the need, as a body, to insist upon generative developments.

Continued disparities between state maintained and PVI

Despite sustained reform and the introduction of new qualifications, the research confirmed that there remains considerable variation across the early years sector, specifically between maintained settings and private, voluntary, independent (PVI) settings. Although EYTs are employed in the maintained as well as PVI sectors, they lack the pay and conditions of those with QTS and cannot be paid as qualified teachers in the majority of maintained settings, which continues to affect their professional status (Nutbrown, 2013; Barron, 2015). As one manager reflected:

"I took the decision to work in early years because it is my passion. I could have earned significantly more money with my qualifications elsewhere but the early years is the reason I get out of bed every morning. But if you are looking at the sector as a whole, and you insist everyone has to have a degree then you have to start paying salaries to reflect the training and commitment they've made to provide the best quality."

Policy demands for 'affordable quality' came under attack from participants in this study for failing to recognise that developing and enhancing the quality of the workforce necessitates a sustained and committed investment. Whilst much of this research is devoted to accounts of creative and effective ways to ensure quality of early years provision through the development of staff, the broader issues remain.

Lack of clear information

"It's confusing, it's awkward. You don't know which one to do. At first, you think 'lots of choices: brilliant!' But then it can also be a pain. I think it's a problem but it's just knowing who to ask, where to go. It's having those training providers to go to and sit down with, and go right, this is what I want to do, and be given particular advice. I think left to your own it can be daunting."

Another fundamental issue concerns the clarity of information about qualifications, their value and usefulness. The 'full and relevant' qualifications checker on the DfE website was bemoaned by all respondent groups in this study. It was reportedly cumbersome, inaccurate and time-consuming to navigate. Consequently, there was liberal reference to relying on Google as a source of information about the relative merits of different qualifications and training available. Relying on Google as a primary source of (mis)information generates greater confusion and uncertainty as information tends to be ambiguous and partial.

Importance of learning communities, supportive management, investment in CPD

Throughout the case study investigations in this research, the significance of supportive employers – and being located within an ECEC community that shares an expectation that all staff should be continually pursuing further qualification and training – act as an important catalyst for a highly qualified

staff. Prioritising investment in staff development involves covering the financial costs of fees, providing cover and ensuring that pay scales reflect the different levels and range of qualifications held by staff. Supporting staff to navigate the contradictions and ambiguities within the national framework of qualifications was also important to ensure they enrolled in, and pursued, recognised rigorous and valuable qualifications. The case studies underscored the need for clear career structures, organisational support and sufficient time to invest in professional development which could be a reaction to the current climate, e.g. the confused qualifications framework, externally imposed requirements and such like.

This research also found that graduate-led Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) can raise the quality of provision. The depth of knowledge about early years theories and philosophies taught on degree programmes can open up ways to view early childhood pedagogy and children's learning more expansively. Effective graduate-led provision can create an environment where the pursuit of higher level qualifications is recognised as valuable, necessary and attainable.

Taking training and the pursuit of qualifications in-house is another option available to larger ECEC providers. Two of the case studies in this research coached and supervised staff to be well-informed about the availability of in-house training. Training packages offered were regarded as an important feature of working for a large organisation as they provide a clear pathway from Level 2 through to Level 7 and directly link to practice.

Across the case studies, being part of a community of practice, with ample opportunities to learn with and from peers has clear benefits for the identification, pursuit, and the successful completion of continuing professional development opportunities was significant. This rests upon the vision and actions of supportive management – whether in a single setting or part of a larger organisation. Early years teams that feel valued and supported throughout their careers are better equipped to navigate the wider policy-driven reforms to the sector.

Recommendations

Regulation of training providers, clear and detailed information about training and qualifications

There needs to be greater assurance that comparable qualifications are rigorous, challenging and fit for purpose. This should be achieved through the regulation of qualifications and providers to ensure that what is on offer is recognised, reputable and transferable (and holds parity with statutory sector). More bursaries and sustained investment to enable the early years workforce to pursue high quality training/qualifications that are specialist and fully recognised should be made available. The lack of clear information about qualifications, their value to employers and usefulness to trainees to feel equipped to work in early years, must be addressed. There must be unambiguous and impartial information made available to members of an overworked, underpaid workforce seeking to enhance their professional development.

Across the datasets the issue of quality persistently resurfaced. Within policy there is a constant demand to 'raise the quality' of early childhood education and care, and the suggestion that this can be achieved by increasing the qualification levels of the workforce. But this research has highlighted a set of complex tensions that has come about through policy reform underpinned by economic imperatives. Attempts to raise the qualification levels of the workforce have been undertaken in an ad hoc and instrumental way (i.e. to increase the levels of qualifications as efficiently as possible and as cheaply as possible) without sufficient regard to the regulation of the training on offer, the practicalities of pursuing and completing programmes, or on the demands placed upon individuals and entire settings.

Research, Experiment, Innovate

The curriculum content on *all* programmes should be updated to include research to cultivate critical reflection and to ensure quality. The importance of embedding research into training and qualifications and cultivating its place within localised learning communities will (collectively) enhance practice. Qualifications and training should enable members of the early years workforce at all levels to question and engage with the underpinning meanings of all aspects of their work. Furthermore, opportunities to develop a critical awareness, not just of early years pedagogy but also of themselves as members of an employment sector, is crucial if the workforce is to transform how it understands itself and how others understand it. In addition:

- Early Years Teacher Status (Level 6) must have QTS and parity with comparable teaching qualifications for the statutory sector;
- Early Years Educator (Level 3) must provide greater focus on birth-to-three specialism;
- A good quality foundational Level 3 qualification should be pursued as a minimum, and should include intensive placements. The GCSE requirement should be removed, and replaced with equivalency/functional skills; and

Learning Communities

There is a need to increase the number of qualified teachers with specialist early years knowledge (but also include graduates from other subject areas as the quality of provision can be enriched by staff with diverse expertise, as well as a knowledge and experience of early childhood). The workforce benefits from effective leadership that promotes active learning communities. Practitioners need support to identify and pursue continuing professional development opportunities that are relevant, rigorous and valuable. Learning and professional development must be recognised as continuous. Aligned to Nutbrown's recommendation, all staff should be in constant pursuit of more knowledge and improved practice through critical reflection, which can be supported through specialist qualifications.

Being part of a community of practice, with ample opportunities to learn with and from peers has clear benefits for the identification, pursuit and successful completion of continuing professional development opportunities. This rests upon the vision and actions of supportive management –

whether in a single setting or part of larger organisation – early years teams need to feel valued and supported throughout their careers.

Shift public (mis)conceptions about childhood

Early years education and care is not (solely) about school readiness and developing children to become competent, worthy citizens. The workforce must be supported to be researchers, adventurers and explorers so that young children can also be understood as researchers, adventurers and explorers from whom we have a great deal to learn (see Murray, 2017). To shift the perceptions of the wider public will require the concerted effort across the entire sector, from advocacy groups, employer organisations, unions, training providers, academics and every single member of the early years workforce, to push for a re-imagin(in)g of the child, the setting and the worker.

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